CHANSONS

POEMS, SONGS

STEVEN FRATTALI

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of

TAIPEI

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Can you tell me
Where I could find
The shimmering leaves
Of the gold-shining poplar trees?
They and their shadows
Were here
Fluttering and whispering
Only a little while ago.
Perhaps it was just last year.

Could you tell me
Where to look
For the perfect word
Written in the ultimate answer book?
You know,
The one that I'd been looking for
For forever and a day or more.

Could you tell me
Where the sand
Falling down quite near my grasping hand
Could all fall upward through
The wasp-waist
And -- you know
I hate to say it -- sphincter
Of the hour-glass
And into the day, the life, the time that was?

Or maybe
Where the perfect love
You know we'd both been looking for,
Not even really looking for
But dreaming of,
Could make its first appearance here,

(Or maybe somewhere fairly near)
Somewhere in the lonely town,
Just ever so lightly touching down.

Faces
That I've met
In public places
And faces that meet
My own
In the neon-ravaged street
In the city of the dead
As I enter a small cafe
Or perhaps just a crowded bar
At the very end of the day --
In some
I sometimes see
A friendly appreciative glance
(Or perhaps it happened once
And I've remembered it all this time)
As on the treacherous, winding stairs
Of restaurants and public squares
Our pairs of eyes will meet,
Seeming almost about to say
"You're not so bad yourself"
Or sometimes perhaps instead,
"Oh yeah, I know your kind,
And I'd just as soon
See you dead."

Or, "What are you?" And, "Who are you?"
And then we go on our way
In the city of the dead.

I remember once
Somewhere
I read
That somewhere in the world
There's someone just right for you.
You know,
Sort of hidden away.
And you've just
Got to trust in fate. How long
Before you find them though's
The tricky part --
The thing that nobody knows,
That no one on earth can say.

The evening light
Is lit
In the room
Where we always used to sit,
Just we two
And maybe the dog also
Just listening to music
Or perhaps a recorded story.
You always used to
Like it, and I
Always did too,

Though I sometimes pretended not to,
Or at least I wouldn't show it.
(The dog would perk his ears up
Now and then.)
I can't help thinking
How long it's been,
And how long it's been
Since we met.
Who would have
Ever thought?
Where did it all start?
How could it be
So long
And so long that we've been apart?

I keep on
Thinking the same few thoughts
Over and over, sitting
Here listening
To the old sad song --
Oh yes it's been so long.
I'm really
Quite a broken record
These days
And you know it just won't do.
You know it won't
And I know it too.

There where
My love lies
Sleeping
Somewhere inside of me
Somewhere I never see
That's
Where it all
Comes from.

Looking and looking
For the mood
Called
Home.

It's the rain
Falling down
On the lonely old town
(O on the roof tum-tee-tum
It's drumming).
It just keeps coming
Day after day.
Oh what does it ever say?
Something like Get some pills Get some pills

Buy a gun Buy a gun
So many so many bills
O when will it ever end?
I can't help thinking of you.
Pointless, I know,
Because you've gone away,
And this time I know
(And I know that I know)
It's to stay.

O it's the rain
That comes almost every day
Always more and more
Falling and falling down
On the lonely forgotten town.
I heard a song once,
I can't remember it
Very well. It was
Just after I knew you.
Yes, that's how long ago.
At our age, troubles -- griefs, really --
Take so very long to tell
And always more and more.
Oh, it's just such a bore.
Pointless, too, because
You've gone away.
And this time I know
(And I know that I know)
It's to stay.

Scotch and soda and I feel
So floating and the world
Goes by --
Just ever so slightly off the ground.
Yes, I'm a little high.
Xanax and Librium
Have stolen my equilibrium
Right right right away.

Oh it just won't do.
Just a very, just a very few
Of your...kisses
I suppose, or whatever,
And these and these
And those and those --
Yellow and green and pink,
I'd throw them all
Right down the sink.

Yes, but what the hell,
Nothing ever goes
The way you want it to.

I remember the sun
And I remember the day.
Even with my head so undone
The memory won't go away.

We went walking downtown,
And I kissed you once.
We walked up and we walked back down,
Almost in a sort of trance.

At least for me that’s what it was.
Oh, none of it makes any sense.
Why is it that we always lose
The one we loved the best?

_____

Listening to Liszt.
The lugubrious gondolier
Pours all his sadness
In my ear.

The rain, the rain
Pours all its melancholy down
On the poor defenseless town.

And there's no help
At all with drink.
I've poured the last down my throat,
The ice cubes in the sink.

Are they melting there?
I guess they must be.
And something wet -- ice water?
Is running down my face.

Why am I so
Alone here -- in this life,
In this world? This town's
Such a lonely place.

Well it was no big deal
It was just the end of time
You wouldn't come down
To meet me anymore
At the foot of the stairs.

Well it was no big deal
It was just the end of the world
You wouldn't kiss me anymore
Or let me hold you tight.

Well it was no problem really
It was just the end of my life
You didn't love me anymore
And that's all there was to that.

There was nothing more to say.
But time and the world and my life --
They went on anyway.
Well, two out of three.

It's late
And I'm lying in bed
Once again alone,
And though I'm tired to the bone
I'm having trouble sleeping
Once again.
The bright full moon
Is keeping
The image of your open mouth
Somewhere inside my head.

What can be done?
I'm just so tired.
I get up and walk around
And then I lay back down again.
Outside the wicked moon
Preserves
The image of your long black hair
Somewhere inside my pen.

Perhaps
It makes no sense.
But think --
I'm writing with black ink.
Oh my empty, empty head --
It's just no use.
I turn the light out finally
Perhaps I'll wake up dead.

Well
It's just a simple thing,
An isolated song
Played, as it were,
On a single string.

Think nothing of it.

O where
Is my love
That I cannot find her?
Where is her voice,
And where her shining face?

Under
The cold ground
Where the tree roots bind her,
Where I feel her touch
In the trickling of the rain.

Waiting and waiting
For my love
Somewhere

Waiting and waiting
Here O here

Show me the light
That washes
The old brick wall
On one side of the courtyard
(Outside, the evening's sounds).

Then I will climb
That golden
Chain-link fence of light
On one side of the courtyard.
(Outside, the evening's sounds.)

My
Aren't we sad today,
And the light
Creeps over the page.
Or perhaps it's only
That at my age
I just can't feel entirely alive
Or even just approximately right
So lonely.

Yes
I guess it must be
Just the mood I'm in,
Merely a passing phase
As they always used to say.
Oh well,
I can certainly
Agree with that.
Yes, I can see
It will all go away.

Like night coming into night,
You come to me waiting here.
Your shadow fuses with my shadow
Your mouth with my mouth,
Your hair around my hair.

Like night coming into day,
You come to my separate space --
Your desire becoming my desire,
Your heartbeat part of mine,
Your skin my skin, and your face my face.

Midday light
In the curtained room,
And yet the tile floor still keeps
The coolness of the night.

Midday light
Through Venetian blinds,
And in bed she checks her watch
Afraid that she'll be late.

Midday light,
And then after when she's gone
The scent of her perfume lingers
On the pillowcase and sheet.

Evening light,
And after now that she's gone
The thought of her is still present
In the room where I sit alone.

She rises from the bed
And stands
At the bathroom mirror there.
Through the window
Come street sounds
And the late night air.

The bathroom light
Snaps off,
And for a moment she disappears.
Then I glimpse her
Mushroom pale
In bluish moonlight
As she makes her way down the stairs.

Eventually
She's back
With a tray of toast,
Some strawberry jam, and tea.
Actually
The tea's for her,
But there's sweet dark coffee for me.

It's been so long
Since I've been in love,
That I almost can't remember
The feelings it's made of.

It's been so long
Since I've had someone to kiss.
Is it more like that?
Or is it more like this?

It's been so long
Since I've had someone in bed.
I lie awake at night
And think of it instead.

O what a bore it is
When you can't find anyone,
But you just have to continue
Living every day alone.

Well it was just the way
They say and who
Could have thought it anyway,
That I would miss her so?

That evening in her apartment,
And her strange perfume
With its dark nostalgic scent,
Curtains drawn in her room,

The last of the evening sun
Bleeding out far in the west --
And I lay with my precious one,
My head upon her breast.

The unspoken law
Hidden somewhere
Deep among bright autumn trees
Where light is darkened in leaves,

The unspoken rule
At the sharp edge of the blinds
That cast bars of light, bars of shade,
Prison stripes on the bed unmade,

The long strict shadows that cut
Up the squares of the sidewalk
Falling away from every street sign
In the dusty afternoon,

Each of these things
Leaves its own special mark
On the two of us here,
On the world we try to share,

On my hand tracing your eyebrow,
On your hand combing your thick black hair.

Eternal streaming
Of the brilliant light
Outside
But in this shuttered room
We two take shelter
Perhaps for just a little bit
And hide
In the ochre gloom

Green water burns
And bright sand,
The high sun punishing the beach
Which glares back
To the day,
The shimmering whiteness turning black
Unless you look away.

Odor of crushed anise
Fills the Calabrian heat.
One hundred and ten in the shade,
And yet
The life, the love,
The world the two of us have made
Is perfect now,
Incomparable, and sweet.

———

See, they are absent --
All the shadows
That throng in the twilight room.
They are no longer your past lovers,
They are merely gods.

How many restless forms,
Vague and yet so clear,
Unsettle your still sleep
Which by its very stillness
I know is imageless and deep.

Shadows and dim radiance
Of ochre and dark gold
Surround your untroubled face.
Venetian blinds make light
A ladder of gold shrapnel,
Bright shards in the body of space.

O tell me to what
And to where
I would climb
Could I somehow ascend
Rung by rung
That absent and radiant stair,
Climbing up one by one
Into that other realm,
Absent yet present here
Before my unwearying eye,
Demanding all contemplation.

Along the sidewalk
Where the shadows move,
As we walk in the sun
As we walk in the moon,

Two other lovers,
Where the shadows move,
Are ahead far ahead of us there,
And they wait for us in the moon.

Sleeping alone
And dreaming alone,
Always dreaming of one thing,
And I guess it must be of you.

Waking alone,
And having coffee too,
Always thinking one thing.
I guess just some thought of you.

Walking down for the news,
Going out at night,
Always the same thing happens --
Someone asks me for a light,

I see the poplar trees in rows --
But really I'm
Thinking of something else.
I guess it must be of you.

To be alone with her
In the dim shuttered room,
Sleeping side by side
The beach down past the walkway
And the highway, too, nearby;

To be alone with her,
Dreaming there side by side,
Breathing together, almost --
Light-ladders lead up the wall;

To be alone with her
While being together, too;
I still remember everything --
The warm still air (no air-conditioning)
Sea salt, and bars of light.

_____

Night comes around,
And the day goes down.
It goes down in the west
Where my love lies.

Night comes in,
And the stars come out,
Scattered from the east
And over to the west
Where my love lies.

Night comes down,
And my sadness returns,
Reaching far into my heart
Where my love lies.

It was always very clear
Right from the start
That we two would draw near
Only to have to part.

It was always unmistakable
That's how the story would go --
An old old story, I know.
I won’t say I told you so.

It was always very clear
What we were headed toward.
But beginnings, you know, are easy.
It's endings that are hard.

_____

A day of sunshine
For a change.
It was so beautiful -- the sunlight
Falling on that corner of the wall
Across the street.

A day of clear sky
And no clouds,
And those there were
Were floating lily pads in the air
Or banks of radiant snow and ice.

A day when everything
Was right,
Except that it had been
So long since I had seen your face
Or touched your skin
Or heard your voice.

_____

I can't imagine why
I love you like I do;
It must be I don't try
To know the reason.

All my little ways
Are hidden in the dark;
It's just the price one pays,
I guess, for such an obsession.

No, don't give me back
My eyes. I must stay blind.
Only in the dark
Will I find what I need to find.

Red sun at morning
Sailor take warning,
Bright sun above
Illuminate one I love.

Red sun at night
Sailor's deep delight,
Silver moon above
Give dreams to the one I love.

_____

It weeps in my heart
As it rains on the town.
What is the sorrow or pain
I hear in the falling rain?

It falls on the roofs,
And it falls on the glossy street --
Grey sky and grey roofs,
Grey sky and black street.

Lights come on slowly,
And still the rain comes down.
Blue light and grey lights
Are streaked on the rain-wet town.

Only now do I know
I have lost the one I love.
Something inside me weeps
For the thing I can never have.

It weeps in my heart
As it rains on the town,
The sorrow and the pain
I hear in the falling rain.

_____

One of these days
You'll think of me,
And then you'll wonder why.
Oh yes you will.
Just wait and see.

One of these days
I'll have to laugh
At the sight of us two
Standing there
In that old photograph.

One of these days
I'll think of you
And maybe just right then --
You never know --
You'll think of me too.

Was it really me?
Was it really you?
Oh it was all so long ago.
How did we ever get into it all?
But then, how could we know?

To be alone with you
In the room shut from day,
Dreaming side by side
As light slowly passes away,
(I still remember everything)
Until finally it's evening.

To be alone with you
In the room filled with night,
Sleeping side by side
As two separate dreams unite,
(I can't remember everything)
And then suddenly it's morning.

_____

Think nothing of it
When you hear the wind repeat
My name to you at night
When you're lying there with someone
And that someone isn't me.

Think nothing of it
When you hear the rain reiterate
My tears on the windowpane,
When you're having a drink with someone
And that someone isn't me.

Think nothing of it
When you see me on the street.
Forget that we ever met
When you're walking by with someone,
Keep walking right on by.

_____

I remember once
How the two of us spent
The autumn afternoon,
Outside just grey trees and rain
And the rain on the windowpane.

The fireplace worked,
And so we made a fire
That autumn afternoon.
How clearly I recall
How our shadows looked on the wall.

And I remember too --
It was long ago and yet
The entire afternoon
Is so present for me still --
The fire light on your breasts, cold rain on the
windowsill.

_____

O I don't know
Why the light falls on the carpet
And ruler-edges down the wall
Just that way.
A golden ruler it is, I guess.
I think I saw it there that way
The other day.
But who can say?

I really couldn't guess
Why the sun
Goes from the east
And over to the west.
It just does it, I suppose.
It must be an ingrained habit
Or one of those
Laws of nature
That I've heard about.

Another one is this:
You love what you can't have,
Or if you can
You give it up,
Only later to discover
It was what you really wanted after all.
But by then, it's over.

_____

So many loves
Dead in your slender arms,
An empty space
Crossed with these shadows.

So many dead loves
Faded as the night is,
Your sleeping face is
Striped with these shadows.

What prisoners
Held behind those bars
Awake and stir there, moving
In the passions of your sleep?

_____

Well it's such a lonely town,
And I really have to admit
I was getting pretty crazy.
I was really desperate.

Well it's such a stupid thing --
I was really going mad.
I was getting just so lonely,
I took out a personals add (don't laugh).

Yes it's a lonely old town,
Just as the old song says
(They must have been thinking of this one).
I keep saying the words as it plays.

_____

We went out for a walk
One day,
The two of us.
We didn't have that much to say
I didn't really
Really want to talk that much anyway.
But that's just me

We went out for a stroll
Just the other day,
The two of us.
The wind blew all the leaves away.
I didn't really
Really want them all anyway.
But that's just me.

We went out on a date
A while back,
(The other day)
The two of us.
You know it would be just my luck,
It got too late
To say it all
Or even half of what I wanted to.
Now it will all just have to wait.
But that's just me.

We went out for a walk
The other night
It was just us two
The moon was very bright
And the clouds were blue

We walked up
And we walked down
And really all around
And really really all around.

The moon was blue
And the sky was bright.
It was a beautiful
Cold September night

For the two of us.

_____

Walking along in thought
And going down through the square
And two pigeons fluttering up
Right up into the air,
Just as I passed by,
Away into the blue September sky.

We were talking there one time,
And it was just a day
Like all the other days,
Just as the world passed by
And the late September day
Faded to the blue of the evening sky.

_____

Well it was
Just so much,
And yet it was
Only the remembrance of your touch.

And it was
So unreal,
You know, and really
Almost more than I could stand to feel.

In what sense
Is it really true
That it was me
And that it was really you?

Well who can say
Which of us
Knew which of us
On that much-recollected day?

_____

Did I love
Her madly?
I did, and I really did.
She loved me
Madly too.
Or at least that's what she said.

But it's all
So funny.
In the end it all comes apart.
And at last
There's only you,
Alone with your remorseless heart.

_____

Between day and dream
In the off-white room
Stained with ochre shadows
Crossed with dusty triangles
Of honey-colored light

It streams through tinted blinds
Between day and dream
Here on an open bed
In the off-white room
That rests on wooden floorboards
Between day and dream

Across from a wooden door
We lie here side by side
And our shadows lie here too
Waiting for gradual night
To fill the off-white room
With neither day nor dreams

_____

My friends all say to me
One day they'll get away.
O but I don't know,
Who can say which way
Which way the wind will blow?

The birds all say to me
One day I'll get away.
O how can they know --
Nothing but bird brains anyway --
Which way the wind will blow?

Leaves falling in the breeze
And the grass at my feet
Growing up right through the concrete
Say to me it will all just blow away.
O but I don't know, who can say
Which way the wind will blow?

_____

I went out to a party.
It was just the other night.
Everybody having a good time.
(Well one couple
Got into quite a fight.)

O it was all just fantastic.
It was great.
I hope we do it again sometime.
I just can't wait.

_____

The other night
(I remember it so well)
It was just the two of us.
And you know they always say
How every night will turn to day.
O but what the hell.

The other night
(I still can see it very clear)
It was just the two of us.
You put your lips close to my ear.
O how long we've all been dead.
But every night must turn to day,
I've often heard it said.

The other night
(I still can feel it so, so much)
It was just the two of us.
I feel the after-feeling of your touch.
Still, they always say
How nothing ever goes the way you want it to.
How long we've all been dead.
O but I do miss you so.

_____

We never slept together.
Probably we never will.
And yet I still remember,
I can see it still
Although it's been a very long time.

The smoky dimness of the bar.
So many little things
Grow very clear.
I see myself there in the mirror.
It's been a very long time.
I saw you there too my dear --

The two of us together,
You moved a little closer...
When was that?
O it was one day...
Whenever.

And I can still remember,
I feel you near me still.
What were you saying to me,
There in the darkness,
Just us two?

I still can hear your whisper.
What were you whispering?
Feel your lips
Close to my ear,
And we were drunk -- yes,
Both of us -- alcohol...
It was so mysterious.

For ten minutes I was happy,
Almost delirious.
It's so funny
How some things happen,
And so strange.
I had to write this song.
Although I know it's been so long.

AFTERWORD

Encounters With the Author in Taipei

We first made the author's acquaintance at a well-known restaurant in Taipei, the Wysteria Tea House, famous as having been a meeting place for dissident intellectuals in the years of political struggle in Taiwan .

During the recent effort to publish his rather extensive work, we had occasion to discuss aspects of his past and current writing.

Your poetry is quite varied in style and in form. Where do you locate yourself in the overall debate concerning poetic form?

I consider myself an eclectic. The main thing for me is to grasp, mentally, a certain object -- that is, an experience, a scene, an event -- to see it and feel it. Any language that seems to convey the reality of that is good, any which remains merely language, merely words, is for me of no interest, in some cases it is actively negative, in the sense of being obstructive.

A cliche?

Yes or not even a cliche but in a way worse than that. Much of our language obscures the nature of reality. Words in themselves are, in a sense, the enemy of writing. I tell students that all the time. Words most often merely convey the usual accepted social understanding. Writing is for the

purpose of grasping reality itself, which is always something other than the social understanding.

Do you consider yourself a political writer?

All writing is political in the sense of attempting to correct these false social understandings. At times its purpose is to merely reveal with a new freshness, a perceptual freshness, as it were. But even this itself has a certain basic political significance, in the sense that awakened human beings will act and think differently than those who are at rest in the normal tranquilized non-perception that we usually are caught up in.

Does living outside the United States help or hinder your writing?

I think it helps, in general. It is in some ways a very undeveloped culture, yet in other ways it is overbearing. (The US, that is.) There is, for example, a great deal of rather stifling political correctness, as it's called, and to get away from that is itself a positive thing. For a while I had no idea how I would ever get all this material published, especially if you're not there trying to do all the "networking" that is needed, and which I was absolutely terrible at anyway -- worse than terrible, I really had no clue, I still don't, I suppose. And then it came about that you could just do it all by yourself, by means of the internet.

How much material is it? It's quite a lot, it would seem.

Yes, I guess it's about 40 volumes or so. Over 2,000 pages, if you want to measure it like that. I don't know how much it would weigh.

There seem to be many styles represented. Was that

something you consciously strove for?

Yes. I always wanted to be able to represent a wide variety of experiences. My first models for the artist were people such as Picasso, Goethe, Bach -- artists who could work in a very wide range of forms and even use widely different styles. Of course, I can't compare myself to people like that, but it was still a goal, to try many types of things.

What sorts of things are you working on currently?

Well as you know I am trying to get all this existing work published, going through it, touching it up here and there, proofreading, and so forth. After that, I think I might return to some translating work -- Holderlin especially, and some Chinese poets, but don't ask me which ones.

All right, but can you say whether they are modern or classical?

Classical. My favorite is Mung Hao-Ren, actually.

There are many other things to talk about, but perhaps that's a good note to end on for now.
But what were you trying to do in these poems in particular?

I was experimenting with popular song forms – jazz lyrics, and the like. There's a certain type of modern lyric – like Prevert, for example, the French perhaps have a number of examples. Did you know that Taipei used to be called Little Paris?

Yes.

About the Author

Steven Frattali is an expatriate American writer living in Taipei. He is the author to date of over 40 volumes of poetry, totaling over 2,000 pages of work. He is also the author of several critical works, among them *Person, Place and World: A Late Modern Reading of Robert Frost* and *Hypodermic Light: The Poetry of Philip Lamantia and the Question of Surrealism.*

About the Banyan Press of Taipei

The Banyan Press of Taipei was founded in 2008 by Samuel Palmer and Steven Frattali. It plans to publish the work of expatriate Anglophone writers of the Pacific Rim who are working outside the norms of mainstream publishing. The Press does not at this time invite submissions, but it hopes to do so in the future.